NOTES
on the
OLD CROSS
at
CANNA

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NOTES ON THE OLD CROSS AT CANNA

Some time ago the writer made a study of the "Musical Angles" relating to their supposed use by the old Irish designers.

This, happily, lead to the thought: If the monks employed the intervals of the musical string to fix the outlines of monuments; they would also be likely to use these intervals in the planning of ornament, and possibly in such a manner as to indicate melodies.

This thought, the musical idea, led to a review of Celtic ornament, part of the results of which it is the object of this paper to present.

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THE OLD CROSS ON THE ISLAND OF CANNA.

This monument, which probably dates from the 10th Century, is located in an old cemetery, situated in the bottom of a narrow glen, near the center of the small island of Canna. This island is one of several which form the parish of Small Isles off the coast of Invernesshire, Scotland.

Although erected on Scotch territory, this cross was probably designed and built by the Irish, as its

principal sculptures come under that class of sacred subjects so constantly used by them in decorating their crosses. The carved reliefs on the Scotch crosses generally represent scenes considered as taken from civil life.

In the upper Zoomorphic panel, on the front of the shaft, the crossed animals are supposed to represent the panther, which here would typify the Resurrection of Christ.

In the early Middle Ages the people had a Christian symbolism founded on the habits of animals. All this was explained in works called "Bestiaries" or "Books of Beasts," which contained stories of the lion, the lizard, the charadrius, the pelican, the phoenix, etc. These stories formed the basis of Christian allegories. Only fragments of one Bestiary in the English language now remain. "This was probably translated" says J. Romilly Allen, "From Latin into Saxon rhyme of the same character as Caedmon's metrical paraphrase of the Scriptures."

The following lines from the poem of the Panther, as given in this Saxon Bestiary, appear to have inspired the sculptor of the panel at Canna, mentioned above:

> *"When the bold animal*
> *rises up*
> *gloriously endowed,*
> *on the third day*
> *suddenly from sleep,*
> *a sound comes*
> *of voices sweetest*
> *through the wild beast's mouth."*

If we may be allowed to define "voices sweetest" as melody or singing, it will appear as if the designer intended these interlaced lines to symbolize melodies. The subjects in the two lower panels present antitheses of the song idea, for here we have discord and strife, as witnessed by the hold the dragons have on each other. The panther and the dragon then, considered as parts of one composition, illustrate the power of sacred song to overcome evil. Engel writes: "The notion that musical sound is a safeguard against the influence of evil spirits has been common to many nations."

Now, if, at either panther, we trace along the line which springs from the animal's mouth and count each intersection where this ornamental line crosses itself or other ornamental line as a musical note, and arrange the resulting progression of notes as a song, we may feel assured we are simply carrying out the old artist's intention. (See Figs. 1 and 2, Pages Five and Six.)

It is well to briefly state here what has been said in regard to music and material form, questions brought up by the musical interpretation of this ornament. "Motion in music," Helmholtz practically remarks, "may imitate motion in space." Dr. Clarke writes: "All the arts, although starting from different points, dealing with dissimilar materials, and differing totally in subject matter, meet at last on this common ground of form or composition."

It is known that certain well ordered ornamental arabesques are similar in construction to musical figures, but it is not generally understood that interlaced ornament was occasionally used by the Celtic monks to symbolize tonal progressions.

The theory that the monks intended this line work to symbolize tone, the writer believes, is proved by their art ideals, which were, in a measure, founded upon doctrines analogous to those held by Pythagoras.

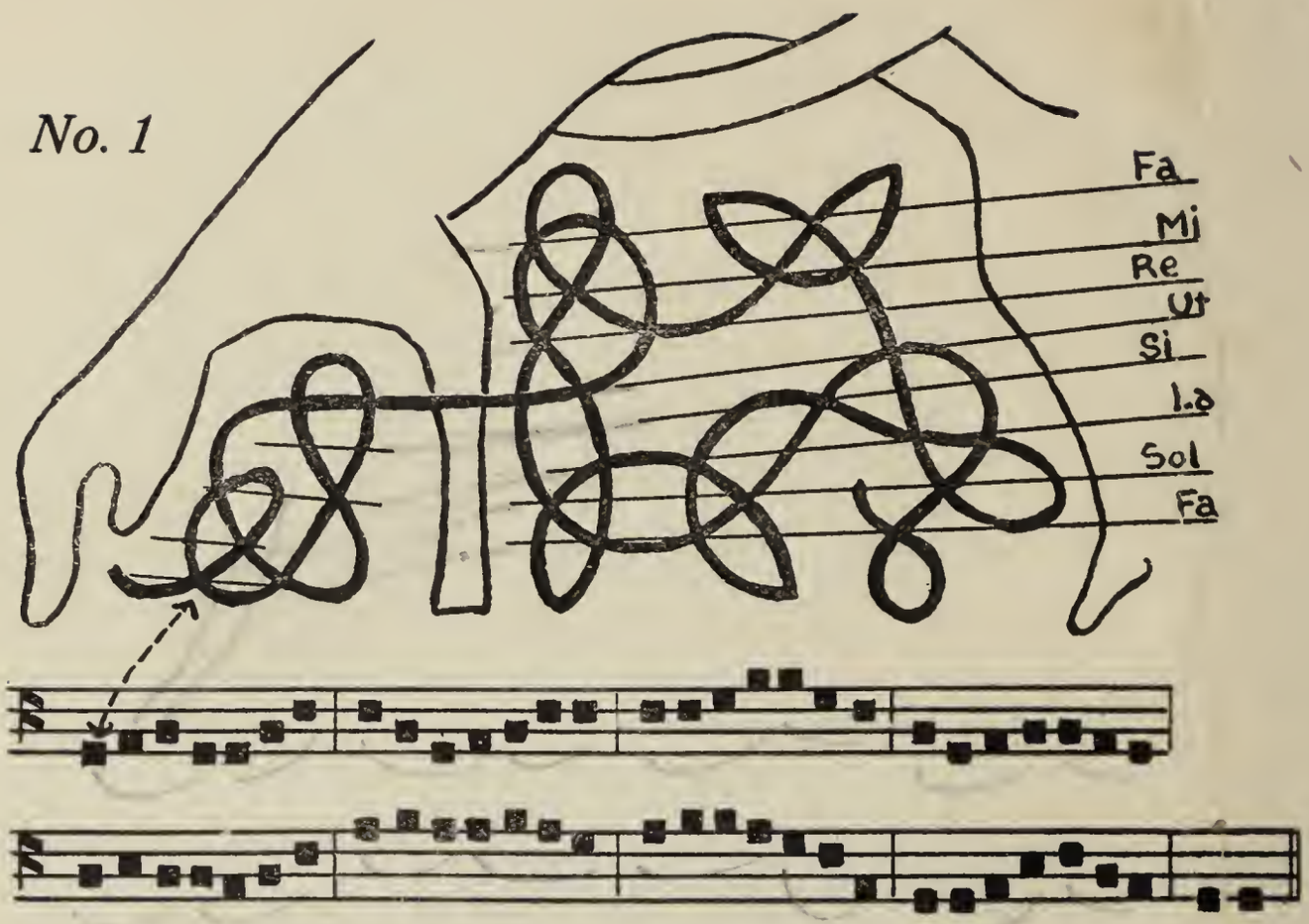
With the Pythagoreans the tonal art was but a part of the greater art of music, which included what may be termed "Form music," dealing with space, as well as audible music, dealing with tone.

To this school, Naumann says: "Number, tone, and the harmony of the universe were identical."

No. 1 *No. 2*

THE PANTHERS
At an Enlarged Scale.

No. 1



The lines Fa, Sol, La, etc., are drawn through the intersections of the ornamental line to assist in the reading.

On the staff the line running between the two points of the clef is Ut, or Do, also Middle C.

This ornamental line considered as notation, although lacking the essentials of modern scores, is yet on a par with the earliest attempts at musical writing which left much for the singer to interpret.

As Celtic art reached its highest stage during the darkest period in the history of Church song, so we can do no better than consider these notes under the light given by their contemporary song—the Gregorian chant.

The Gregorian melodies were composed in different scales or modes, each having its special character, as grave, solemn, devotional, expressed in its tonality.

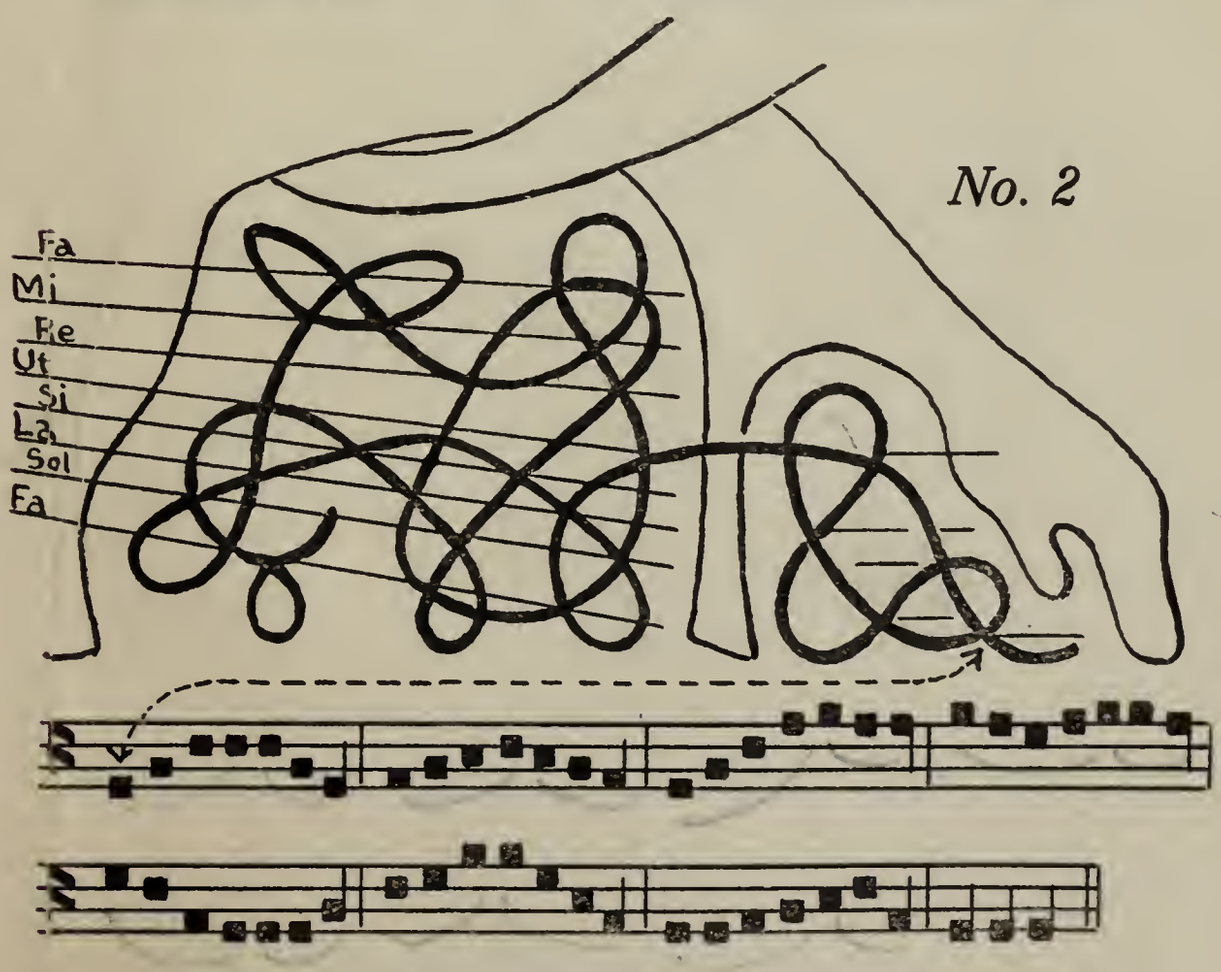
The notation from Canna, which is from a symbol of the Resurrection, evidently was intended to give Easter songs of a joyful character.

Now the melodies composed in the Lydian, or fifth, Gregorian mode, Fa to Fa, have a joyful character, and so it is the appropriate mode in which to arrange the notes from Canna.

The chants in the Gregorian modes are also characterized by the succession of certain notes (different in each mode) called the principal chord.

The principal chord in the fifth mode is Fa-La-Do, it is the prominence of these notes which give the distinctive tonal character to the songs composed in this mode.

That these songs from Canna were composed in the fifth mode, Fa to Fa, appears evident. They



The notes with a stem should be sung a little louder and longer than the others.

each sound the principal chord of this mode, Fa-La-Do, at or near their beginning. Separately, these character tones, counting Fa in each octave, occur thirty-eight times in one song, and thirty-two in the other, numbers sufficient to give the desired tone quality, and prove the intelligent musical intention of Canna's unknown author.

The fifth mode, when Si is flatted, becomes the modern major mode, and as Hurley writes,* "Pieces in the fifth mode, with Si natural are very rare," so it is also proper to arrange the Canna notation in the modern major scale.

In the syllabic chants the length of the notes is determined by the words and syllables to which they are set. In the songs from Canna, which are independent of text, there can be no objection if the notes are given the same length, but whether their division into measures of seven is equally permissible, may be questioned. These problems, however, are beyond the scope of this paper as its purpose is simply to call attention to the notes on the old cross at Canna.

The End

**Gregorian Chant, by Edmund G. Hurley*

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M. So.

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